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EUROPE

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A European superpower

Might George Bush be a handmaiden in the building of a European superpower?

AFTER the shock of George Bush's re-election, Europe's elite is taking comfort in a new cliché. "The second Bush administration", it suggests, "could be the greatest boost to European federalism since the cold war." Most polls across Europe showed strong support for John Kerry, with Poland the only European country to plump for Mr Bush. Now that the bogeyman is back with a stronger mandate, those Europeans arguing for a declaration of independence from America have also had a boost. It was not hard to decode last week's statement by Jacques Chirac, France's president, that, after the American election, Europe has "more need than ever to reinforce its unity and dynamism." In similar vein, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's prime minister, told *Der Spiegel* that "Europe must have faith in the prospect of becoming the most important global power in 20 years."

Such exhortations are liable to be scoffed at on the other side of the Atlantic. The Europe that Mr Zapatero aspires to see as a world leader is a continent stuck with a growth rate that is feeble compared with America's, let alone China's and India's. An ageing and shrinking population hardly promises a better future. European military might remains relatively puny, while the technological gap with the United States is growing.

Yet for all this, it would be unwise for Americans to dismiss the idea that the European Union could ever emerge as an alternative superpower. Some elements are already there; others are nascent. As Adam Posen of the Institute for International Economics in Washington, DC, points out in a recent paper, after the enlargement of the EU to 25 countries earlier this year "Europe has finally caught up to the United States in economic size. Both economies at present have an annual income of around \$11 trillion." Mr Posen reckons, however, that this will be a "fleeting equality" (his paper can be found at www.brookings.edu/fp/cuse/analysis/). Projecting forward to 2020, he finds that, even on the most optimistic set of assumptions, the EU economy would then be 7% smaller than that of the United States. Take a more pessimistic scenario and the gap could be 20%.

But Mr Posen leaves an important factor out of his calculations: the prospect of further enlargement. The EU of 25 already has 455m inhabitants, compared with 295m Americans. By 2020, it is quite plausible that the EU will have admitted Turkey and all the Balkan countries, pushing its population close to 600m. The newcomers will not be rich, but experience suggests that they will grow fast once EU membership becomes a realistic prospect. The EU could thus expand its economic might simply by continually adding new members, even if that looks a bit like arithmetical sleight of hand.

Neither a large output nor a large population guarantees that the EU will be able to project power, however. Indeed enlargement could make this task harder by making the EU increasingly unmanageable. Traditional European federalists are already worried that an enlarged EU could degenerate into little more than a talking-shop. Much will depend on how far EU members believe that they share common interests.

It is here that Mr Bush may play a role as an inadvertent federaliser. Rising levels of hostility in Europe to American "unilateralism"—and a feeling (however premature) that America has failed in Iraq—are feeding popular demands for the creation of a European counterweight to the United States. Even before Mr Bush's re-election, this sentiment was reflected in pan-

European polls. In June, the German Marshall Fund found widespread support for the idea that "the European Union should become a superpower like the United States". Perhaps unsurprisingly, this notion commanded 83% support in France. But it also got over 50% support in Britain and Poland.

Even if the Europeans had the will and the economic muscle to achieve superpower status, there would still be a big gap between ambition and reality. Ancient national rivalries within Europe lurk beneath the surface, and they tend to bubble up at times of international crisis: witness the splits over Iraq and before that over the Balkans. Even in less heated times, EU countries show a marked tendency to talk European but to act national. For instance, France and Britain will not countenance any talk of replacing their national seats on the UN Security Council with a single EU seat. Germany's attempt to get its own permanent membership of the Security Council is being opposed by Spain and Italy—in the name of Europe, naturally.

George Bush, recruiting sergeant

Yet taking a snapshot of the situation in 2004 and assuming it will remain forever unchanged could be misleading. For the first 30 years of its existence, the European Economic Community had no serious role in foreign policy at all. Now attempts to shape a common foreign policy are a big part of the EU's business. If the new constitution is ratified, the Union will acquire its own foreign minister and diplomatic corps. And whereas there have been high-profile debacles, particularly over Iraq, the EU's common foreign policy is making its presence felt in other areas.

The foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany also seem optimistic that they have achieved a breakthrough in limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions. And the Europeans were highly influential in persuading Russia to sign up to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, against the wishes of the Americans. Europe is even beginning to get its act together militarily. In December the EU will take over the military operation in Bosnia from NATO, a development treated with some suspicion in Washington.

European federalists hope that, over the next four years, Mr Bush will continue to serve as a recruiting sergeant for their cause. But they may need to seize their moment. In a generation's time, the rise of China, or radical Islam, or something else, may make efforts to depict America as a bogeyman that needs a counterweight seem deluded and frivolous.